

OF GRASSROOTS, ARTS, AND PROGRESS

B Y

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The Church never forgave Galileo, for his declaring that the earth moves around the sun. He was persecuted for it but priesthood got such a shattering blow from his discovery that it has yet to recover from it.

Order of the universe took different course than the one set by Aristotle. The belief of earth being centre of everything was shattered, the pedestals of philosophical concepts of humanity were swept off. The 'change' was given new title, that of 'rebirth' the 'Renaissance'. Leonardo, Michaelangelo, Raphael and others broke away from old order and their quest for knowledge brought in the West a wave of new inventions and discoveries in spite of all the resistance, inquisition and papal wraths. Amongst those stalwarts of change and progress was one Botticelli. He was forced to burn his paintings under the influence of revivalist Savonarola.¹ Interestingly, Leonardo, who was reluctant to paint the face of Christ, for want of model of such a noble character, was quick to paint Juda's face with that of Savonarola.² The inherent human character of artists, scientists and politicians or poets, gave new ideas which replaced mediaeval thinking. The process of change never since looked back in Art and life.

Life is in progress, and so is the creativity and progress in art. In fact the two are hand and glove with life pattern of mankind. The ceaseless emergence of newness is the soul of creativity and creativity is soul of arts. The past may be a catalyst or a provider of lessons from history but it is not the repeating history that advances civilizations. Great human civilizations were created by progressive thoughts and culture built on fundamental principles of progress, enlightenment and urge for newness. There is no going back in art and creations. It is only a retrogressive and fanatic suggestion that such and such glorious past be revived in art or life. None of Revivalist Bengal School painters could match contribution of Amrita Sher Gill, the mother of modern art in Indo-Pak subcontinent.

The charm of life is in living it out in all its different phases from the cradle to the grave. If a processing machine turns an adult into a child or an old man into a youth to restart life he has already lived, the repetition of the same life would be quite boring.

Islamabad is an enchanting sight for visitors from Cholistan, but

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only for a week or so. Then the scenic beauty of Marghalla hills begins to loose its hold over him as it has on even tasteful people of Pakistan Television Headquarter there. Murree, the hill station of reputed beauty, does not hold a visitor for long. Strolling on the Mall and visits to sights in and around Murree make one sick after a couple of days stay. Human nature and our eyes are ever in search of the new and exciting. Nature brings change in all things around us. The cosmic phenomenon is in change. But the paradox is also there that the change or new idea, even those which are openly for betterment of mankind, are mostly resisted. Why are the human thoughts suppressed? Yes, why? But yet the ideas do take birth and despite the resistance and reactions, from taboo ridden minds and the vested interests, get established. The contraceptive methods do restrict conception, but only to a certain extent. Births do take place whether one likes it or not, once conception occurs, off-springs are on their way to appear. The stoppage of such births can only result in murder of the unborn, and no society, religious or secular, would like to indulge in infanticide. Art creations are also brought into world by a process of conception and perception somewhat similar to the one in human beings. Artists perceive and conceive in spite of what goes on around them. Artists are mothers while society is the father. No amount of devices of sterilisation, voluntary or otherwise, or rhetoric on the virtues of birth control, can stop this seed from turning its fruit. For mental as well as physical health of parents, the artists and the society, lesser the artificial hindrance, better and finer the results would be. And healthier the natural growth, brighter would be the future of mankind. The eupharic judgments pronounced on arts being bad or good, or a few self-conceived moral judgment: or the cacophony of them as regards upkeeps and upbringing of the already born could hardly matter, so long as they are not put under frames. The attitudes of ignorants and official priests, have for ages been hostile to art and its progress, or for that matter to anything: and everything of reason. But one can stop the clock on the wall, and even reverse its movement, yet the living time is ever advancing. The change it brings in every bit of second cannot be stopped. Both nature and man are busy in process of that resistless time. They invent and innovate from strangest and most difficult circumstances and amidst most vicious conspracies against them.

James Burke quotes philosopher Wittgenestein's reply to a question, "What a bunch of no-knows we medieval Europeans must have been back in the days before Copernicus, to have looked up at the sky and thought that what we saw up there was the sun going round the earth, when, as everybody knows the Earth 'goes round the sun, and it does not take too many brains to understand that." Wittgenestein replied,³ "Yes, but I wonder

what it would have looked like if the sun had been going round the earth." The point is that it would, of course, have looked exactly the same. What he was saying, according to James Burke, was that 'you see what you want to see'. I may be forgiven here for relating a personal incident as an example. An art critic from Karachi wrote a column on one of my paintings which I had exhibited there, along with 25 other canvasses. Out of the whole lot only one painting which depicted a nude couple was attractive enough for the critic to record his observations. My work was dubbed as pornography. The rest of my work did not appeal to him. Similarly at my Islamabad exhibition on Palestinian refugees in Beirut, the Zionist military uniform was misconstrued. I agree with Prof. Burke, 'you see what you want to see.' Cultivation of sense of appreciation for change and for the new is of course difficult, but not impossible. A few centuries back when all were looking at sun going round the earth, they took themselves as Aristotles of their times, and the Church too agreed wholeheartedly with them. They were also looking up at what they thought was perfect and unchanging universe. Since it had been created on the day of creation, and by none other than the Deity, it had to be perfect. And if it were perfect then, there would be no change there to see. So they, in the West, did not look up much. At the same time, however, the Chinese were busy getting a crick in the neck from doing just that, observing what was going up there. They became expert astronomers centuries before the West did; not because they were clever and the Westerners were dummies but because there was nothing in their model, as there was in the West, to stop them from seeing changes up there. The West saw no change up in the sky because they thought there was none to see. Comets and supernovae were thought of as warnings from God. James Burke says, "If you believe the cosmos is made up of omelette, you build instruments specifically designed to find traces of intergalactic yolk. In that paradigm you reject phenomena like pulsars and black holes as paranormal garbage. In an omelette cosmos, the beginning of universe become a chicken and egg problem, does not it? The conservative resistance to change was understandable. The idea of earth moving round the sun was unacceptable because it would have had philosophical and theological implications that were too hot to handle. The Bible would have been seen to be wrong. The change was always fought and resisted in history."⁴

"A new loom came in from Arab Spain. It had footpedals which left the weavers hands free to weave faster and make more cloth and a lot of bit cheaper. The Dutch weavers smashed the thing up because it would have put people out of work."⁵ That was what was Europe in the 12th century.

A generation later, when the dust settled, in came the spinning

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wheel, a total surprise from China. It made thread turning very much faster than before and when the wheel and the loom were thus put together, the production of cloth skyrocketed. So there were more riots, because the cloth was linen, which was made from the cotton plant and was cheaper than feeding sheep and making wool. No wonder, the rioters were sheep farmers.

" The technology manufactures not gadgets, but social change. Once the first tool was picked up and used, that was the end of cyclical anything. The tool made a new world. The next one changed that world. The one after that changed it again, and so on. Each time the change was seen to be permanent. But using the tool changes even the science, and ever and anon permanently whether we like it or not." ⁶

Today we are in fact the last of the old world, living with institutions that are already creaking, facing twenty first century problems with nineteenth century attitudes. That was what worried NASA in space age. In our case it is the fourteenth solving problems of twelfth century.

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